Religious Tolerance in Malaysia: An Overview

Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor

Department of Islamic History and Civilization,
Academy of Islamic Studies, Universiti Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Abstract: Religious tolerance is one of the important aspects in multicultural society in the world including Malaysia. At the same time, the way in dealing with religious issues also determines the kind of society that we aim to have. This article examines this issue and to highlight how it has been resolved internally by respecting religious aspect of human life. In Malaysia, religious issues, such as the demand to use the word ‘Allah’ by Herald Catholic Weekly in its publication has given another test on religious tolerance. Even though the High Court judge allowed this Catholic publication to use the Word ‘Allah’, the authority has kindly advised the publication not to use it for internal security reasons. This is to respond to the internal reaction by Muslim as well as non-Muslim who started to show some unrest actions. This includes violence by burning several churches, surau (Muslim prayer hall) and pig head thrown into mosques. It can be concluded that religious tolerance must sustain through respect and mutual understanding which will bring peace and stability to the country. This paper implies that respecting each other religion is vital for any society. Future work could be suggested on religious educational aspects in plural society to reduce religious tension.

Key words: Religious Tolerance, Malaysia, The word Allah, Muslim, Non-Muslim

INTRODUCTION

One of the most fascinating aspects of human’s life is its unique dimension of relationships. Throughout the history of mankind, human have displayed all kind of characteristics and capabilities that made us distinctive from other creatures on this planet. One such trait is how we behave and respond towards other human, especially those who we perceived as ‘different’ from us [1]. In such a diverse nation as Malaysia, one can observe the many inter-relations which have existed for a period of time [2]. One of these relations is tolerance and more specifically religious tolerance. Due to the unique fusion of ethnicity and religion in Malaysia, much has been discussed of its inter-relation dimension.

Malaysia is a country in South-East Asia, with majority of over 50% of its people practicing the faith of Islam, a way of life that has become very synonymous with the Malay culture, the dominant ethnic in Malaysia. Islam is the official religion of the country; however there are a number of religions being practiced beside it [2, 3]. What is interesting is that in Malaysia, religion and ethnicity generally are considered together: the Malays are usually Muslims, the Chinese are normally Buddhists or believers of Taoism or folk religions and the Indians are Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs. The Christians faith is practiced from the various ethnic groups [3]. There are also other religions practiced by a small number of the community. In a country such as Malaysia that practices such diverse beliefs [5], but where its believers live as one nation, contacts bound to come sooner and later and it is not surprising where religious issues have oftentimes become much concern to all walks of life. With the addition that religion is closely intertwined with ethnicity, most people become very strongly affected when sensitive issues are touched. One such issue is religious tolerance, a concept that Malaysians need very much learn to understand and accept, in order to live in harmony with one another.

Why would religious tolerance be a topic that is much concerned about? In a country with such diverse beliefs and principles, its very stability depend very much on its citizen ability to get along with one another, as unity is an essential foundation in the forming of a strong and great nation. For many Malaysians, the issue of religion is quite sensitive. Especially for many Malay
Muslims who were born into the faith, Islam could be said as part of their core being and must not be taken lightly [6]. In an era where freedom of speech and rights are much exercised, it is all the more serious when certain individuals or parties tried to play with certain issues that will disrupt or threaten the sensitivity and relationships between its citizens. Although Malaysia in any way does not disregard any beliefs or culture of its people, it must be understood that the extensive period of Muslim rule and Muslim culture in its history is an essential factor that formed the root of Malaysia as it is known today. However, treating religious issues as sacred and –not-to-be-discussed matter does not contribute to better understanding or tolerance either. It is important that important issues are clarified so that the entire parties involved world understand and be willing to work together to prevent any disparities in the community.

This paper proposes to look at how religious tolerance figure in the inter-religious relationships of the Malaysians, especially between Christians and Muslims in regard of the issue of the use of the word ‘Allah’, the word used by Muslims to refer to God, by the Christians. Although religious tolerance is greatly promoted, it must be understood that as a nation, Malaysians has to comply with the law of the country and that any act that may cause harm or danger to its people, such as fights or hatred must be avoided.

Background of Islam in Malaysia’s Government System:
In order to look at the current religion scenario, it is helpful to examine the historical background of Malaysia. Before Malaysia became an independent nation, it had been colonized by the British for more than 200 years. When the British first came, the majority of the people of Malaya (as it was known then) were Malay Muslims, especially in the West Malaysia and many different ethnic groups who were indigenous people known as non-Malay Bumiputera in the Sabah and Sarawak. Under the British rule, Chinese from China migrated to Malaya particularly for the purpose of tin-mining in the later part of 19th century. Later, the Indians were brought from South India for the large scales commercial agriculture starting in 1820s. The Chinese and Indians settled in Malaya and gradually began to build their own communities, including schools and temples in various part of the country [7]. In order to protect the rights of all the citizens in the community, encompasses of a number of races, culture and religion, the law now known as The Constitution of Malaysia was constructed.

The Constitution of Malaysia in Article Number 3, states that Islam is the religion of the Federation, while other religions may be practices in peace and harmony in any part of the country. This shows that although Islam has been recognized as the official religion of the nation, other religions are free to be practiced by other believers. Furthermore in Article 11, it is stated that every individual has the right to profess and practice his religion [8]. This is to ensure that believers of a religion need not worry about religious discrimination, specifically non-Muslims since they are living in a Muslim country. The law provided the right to all individual.

In the current Malaysia context, religion has always played a tremendous role in a majority of its people. If we are to look at the leaders of this country, we can see a trend of making Islam as part of their policies [9], such as done by the prime ministers. Tun Dr. Mahathir, the Prime Minister advocated the idea of ‘modernist’ Islam in his government and building of the nation through the implementation of Islamic values, as well as establishing Islamic institutions such as Islamic banking and university. Anwar Ibrahim, the leader of an Islamic non-governmental organization (NGO), Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM) became a promising figure in the government Islamisation process [9]. He joined the government in 1983, started with Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports before he became Minister of Education in 1986. Later on in 1991, he became Minister of Finance and two years later in 1993 he was appointed Deputy Prime Minister. His success in promoting moderate Islam in government system continued but it was not for long. He became a political victim in 1998 and was sacked from all government and party posts, which he was a Deputy President of ruling party – United Malay National Organization (UMNO) [10].

During post-Mahathir era, Islam Hadhari or Civilizational Islam was introduced by Abdullah Badawi, Malaysia’s fifth Prime Minister of that time. He believed that the approach of Islam Hadhari is able to bring all Malaysians together, which based on the 10 principles that he tried to introduce [11, 12]. The concept of Islam Hadhari gained tremendous attention, not just locally, but also globally. It was one of the contributing factors that brought a landslide win to the coalition party in March 2004 General Election [13], where the idea of progressive Islam attracted the majority of the community. However, the same idea failed to sustain in the following election, where the ruling party experienced a loss of two-thirds of the majority in the 2008 General Election.
In a more recent development, the present Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak has introduced the idea of One Malaysia One Ummah with emphasis on the concept of wasatiyyah, which means moderation and tolerance [14]. The present Prime Minister believes that a more comprehensive and integrated concept that aligns with the requirement of Islam is necessary in order to actualize the idea of 1Malaysia for the purpose of dealing with the many issues and problems in the society. However, so far the concept is not being promoted as much as Islam Hadhari was back in Abdullah Badawi’s days.

The steps taken by the leaders are very important in running any states. This includes an Islamic country such as Malaysia. A country ruled by Muslim, where almost half of its population is non-Muslims must always be concerned about the concept of tolerance between its people. In this regards, many Muslim scholars look back at the time of the Prophet Muhammad who lead a multicultural Medina. At the time, Muhammad become the leader of Medina and established the Constitution (Sahifat al-Madinah), in order to ensure that the population of the city which include Muslims and non-Muslims inhabitants will be able to live peacefully together [15]. Hence, the ideal world of harmony would be eventually existed.

**Religious Issue in Malaysia: the Use of the Word Allah by Non-Muslims:** There have been many issues that are religion-related in the country. However, as with other issues in Malaysia, a religion-related issue is not just one simple issue in a nation where many aspects are closely knitted, including religion, race, politics and economy. Issues such as religious freedom, religious equality, conversion into a religion, religious pluralism and many others have long been scrutinized and debated. Some of these issues have been openly and actively debated, but most of them remain unclear and continue to contribute to the already fragile grounds of society balance. One of the issues is the use of the word Allah by non-Muslims in Malaysia.

**The Ruling on Permission to Use the Word Allah by Non-Muslims:** In 2007, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) instructed the Herald magazine, a Catholic weekly magazine based in Sabah to stop the using the word ‘Allah’ in its publication along with the words ‘Baitullah’, ‘solat’ and ‘kaabah’. This had led to the magazine filing a claim against the restrictions placed by MOHA. In 2008, the ruling of Kuala Lumpur High Court which allowed the Herald to use the word ‘Allah’ had raised an outcry, especially from the Muslims and elicited various responses from the many sectors of the society. The decision was made by Judge Lau Bee Lan, following the appeal of the Archbishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur, Tan Sri Murphy Pakiam. He requested for a court review to challenge the decision of MOHA which prohibited the use of the word Allah in the magazine and that the word Allah is not exclusive to Islam only [16].

The Catholic Church listed their reasons to continue the use of the word of Allah in the newspaper The Sun on 24th December 2007. In the article ‘Church leaders explain the use of Allah’ there were five bases given by the church authority as to why they wanted to continue to use of the word Allah. Although they claimed that their reasons are valid, in actuality, these claims can easily be refuted, both from academic and religious aspects [17].

As a result of this dispute, unfortunate incidents have taken place, which show how dire the situation is. One was the arsonists’ attacks on churches in Malaysia. The first incident took place in Desa Melawati and later the church in Jalan Templer, on the 10th of January 2010 [18]. A number of churches later became victims as well. On the other side, Muslims also suffered from this issue when their worship houses became part of the conflict. Two mosques in Petaling Jaya and Jalan Klang Lama were thrown pig heads into their compounds [19]. These incidents that involved houses of worship have gained much attention locally and globally. While the Malaysian government urged the everyone to keep calm, two brothers were sentenced to five years of prison after they were found guilty for attacking one of the churches. Raja Mohamad Faizal Raja Ibrahim, 24 and his brother Raja Mohamad Idzham Mohd Ibrahim, 22 pleaded innocent to the charges, claiming that they were at a restaurant when the incident took place and the burnt on Raja Mohamad Faizal’s hands were a result of a barbeque incident [20].

**For and Against the Use of the Word Allah by Non-Muslims:** While one part of Muslims worries about the consequences of the court ruling that allows the Catholic Church to continue with the use of the word Allah, others are willing to consider the situation. The government opposition coalition party which includes Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) [21], Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) [22] and Democratic Action Party (DAP) [23] believe that the use of the word ‘Allah’ by the non-Muslims is a positive development and should be openly accepted. They believe that it is actually an
advantage to the Muslims and Islam if the non-Muslims were to use the word where they are also indirectly giving attribute to the word as Muslims are. However, Muslims should remember that the same word bring different connotations to Muslims and non-Muslims, which is why it has become such a big concern.

The current government’s stand is not to discuss this issue openly as well as discouraging any attempt to do so [22], as it may cause uneasiness not just among the Muslim community but all the citizens of Malaysia as this issue is closely tied with the relationships of the different religions in Malaysia. Among other parts of the community, there are also various reactions towards the issue.

The *fatwa* (Islamic ruling) of the National Fatwa Council Malaysia, which held its 82nd council session on 5-7th of May 2008 had come to the conclusion that the word Allah is a sacred word and is exclusive to Islam and Muslims and may not be used by nor liken with religions other than Islam. Muslims are charged to protect the word as best as they could [24]. National Fatwa Council was established in 1978 for the purpose of coordinating state religious council activities and with the power to issue rulings on any religious matter affecting Muslims.

For Muslims NGOs such as *Persatuan Ulama Malaysia* (PUM), they clearly opposed the use of the sacred word by non-Muslims. While condemning the act of violating any house of worships of any religion, PUM asserted that it is important for Muslims and non-Muslims alike to be more sensitive towards religious issues to prevent any conflict between the religions and racial disunity [25]. Another NGO, *Jemaah Islah Malaysia* (JIM) also urged the community to respond in a calm manner towards the issue, instead of being emotional and violent [26].

**CONCLUSION**

Muslims and Non-Muslims should understand that although they are free to practice their own religions, there are certain boundaries that should not and could not be crossed. The use of the word Allah is something that falls under that category, not just because the claim to the word is not justified, but also because there are other issues that should be considered, such as the stability of peace and harmony between the citizens of a country. Since there is no religious obligation in Christianity to use the word Allah in their religion, the same word has a very sacred meaning in Islam and must not be taken lightly. That is in fact the very essence of religious tolerance, where respect and understanding of each other must be well-grounded. Muslims are not simply trying to show ownership of the word, or trying to win an argument but they are protecting their religion, which is what every religious person should be able to understand. The same goes to Muslims who feel that there is no reason why non-Muslims should be banned from using the word. Although they believe they are being tolerant, but the allowance need to be made with proper understanding of the issue. As for those who feel strongly of the matter, they need to respond in a rational and intellectual manner, instead of being emotional because the arson attacks will only encourage further similar or worst happenings and contribute nothing to peace and harmony of the multi-religious community of the country.

**REFERENCES**


